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A gift of life for Nikita

The lioness was kept as a pet in a crack house. Now she's the latest addition at Wildlife on Easy Street, which keeps 170 homeless big cats.

By JACKIE RIPLEY, Times Staff Writer

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CITRUS PARK -- Nikita spent her first months of life chained to the wall of a Tennessee crack house, declawed and emaciated. But things are looking up for the young African lioness who now lives on Easy Street.

"Someone had a lot of expendable money and not a lot of brains," said Scott Lope, general manager for Wildlife on Easy Street, a big cat sanctuary in the heart of Citrus Park. "They thought this cute lion would make a great pet."

But big cats don't make great pets, so the sanctuary ends up home to dozens of abandoned cats, mostly tigers. Often, they arrive malnourished, disfigured, and refugees from circuses. Sometimes the smaller felines such as bobcats are found roaming around neighborhoods, turned out because owners were unable to domesticate them.

Because Nikita was declawed it was impossible to reintroduce her into a typical pride of lions, said Carole Lewis, owner of Wildlife on Easy Street. She was contacted by the Nashville National Zoo when no other suitable home could be found.

"She was starved half to death," and was scheduled for euthanasia, Lewis said.

At the same time, the sanctuary also accepted Andi, Sierra and Rocky, three bobcats from the Nashville zoo.

"They were bred for exhibit," Lewis said, but "were being kept in holding cages for the past three years."

Wildlife on Easy Street spans about 40 acres at the end of a bumpy, unpaved road south of Citrus Park Town Center and is home to about 200 animals, including 172 cats. The felines are kept behind fenced enclosures but visitors can watch as tigers swim in a lake and run full speed through their 3-acre cat-a-tat. Bearcats, ocelots and bobcats drape themselves over tree limbs while caracals, servals and jungle cats chase lizards and birds, and lions lounge in desert-like enclosures.

Nikita and her three bobcat buddies arrived at Easy Street two weeks ago. Lewis estimates the sanctuary has raised \$3,000 of the \$10,000 needed to house and care for the four new cats for the rest of their lives.

The smaller cats seem to be fitting in with few problems, but Nikita has taken a little longer to adjust.

"She's very much a sweetheart and wants to play," Lope said. But "she doesn't know what to think. She would rather be with people."

Nikita has some health problems, but is expected to recover.

"People don't realize you have to feed them a very specialized diet," Lope said. "They need the right exercise and it appears she was not kept on a soft surface, probably a concrete garage or dog kennel."

Fluid-filled sacs formed on the back of the cat's knees, caused by resting on a hard surface. Lope said they "are more cosmetic than detrimental to her health, but they're still not a good thing."

Nikita was recently placed in an area with two other female lions: Maya, a young cat who is partially paralyzed and had one eye surgically removed, and Sarabi, a Barbary lion.

Lope said the plan is to pair up the two smaller lions and then introduce them to Sarabi, a larger and more intimidating cat.

"We were hoping Nikita could be a companion to Maya," Lope said. "She's just dying to play and insane to have a friend."

- Jackie Ripley can be reached at 269-5803.

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